

Managing Your Time as a Freelancer

By BNET Editorial

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In theory, when you work in an organization, systems and processes are in place to help you manage your work. However, often it is these very systems and processes that drive people out of organizational contexts and into freelance work.

The freelance world, on the other hand, is defined by its lack of structure. Any structure that exists has been put in place by you to meet your own needs, and any system or process that you adopt is created by you to facilitate your work.

Many new freelancers find it disconcerting to manage their own working practices. However, with a little self-knowledge and thought, you can create the fabric and flow of your business to meet your personal needs.

What You Need to Know

I find that even though I plan to focus on a certain activity, I am interrupted so much that I can't seem to start, yet alone finish. How can I manage this?

Managing interruptions is a key time management skill. If your interruptions come by way of the telephone, switch it to your answering machine for the duration of your planned activity. If the interruptions come by way of visitors dropping in with a request or for a chat, gently steer them away explaining that you have some work that you need to attend to and ask them to come back at a prearranged time. Also, avoid reading your e-mails as these can expand to fill whatever time you have available. All these activities can be postponed until you have completed your planned work.

I seem to fall into my day and spend the rest of it in reaction management. How can I get some control?

Try sitting down at the end of the day and plan your priorities for the next day. If you do not have clear goals and objectives, you will end up responding to whatever demands are being made of you and you will be unable to gain any control. You are not being a "real" freelancer if you become a hostage to circumstance—freedom to choose is the goal.

I seem to spend all my time with one client and I'm concerned that when the project finishes, I will be high and dry. What can I do?

If you are concerned about the famine after the feast, ask your client if he or she can introduce you to someone who can give you further work. There is nothing more powerful than a recommendation. Also, as the project comes to an end, plan to spend more of your time marketing your services and networking. It is time to raise your profile.

I don't have time to meet new people who may want to buy my services. How can I expand my network without spending too much time doing so?

Many freelancers think they have to target specific people in organizations to sell their services to. However, there are much more efficient ways of meeting new people than on a one-to-one basis. Try going to professional functions or events, most of which take place outside standard working hours. Contribute an article to a professional magazine or offer to speak at a conference. These are some of the ways you can increase your visibility and credibility without spending too much time doing so.

What to Do

So, you thought you had gotten away from the bureaucracy of organizational life, but no, it does not disappear just because you are freelancing. In fact, instead of taking responsibility for a comparatively small area of the business, you now have to take responsibility for the entire entity—and much of it contains repetitious and tedious work. Because this is so, many freelancers concentrate on the juicy rewards of doing the work and neglect to keep up to date with the requirements of running a small business.

Time is, perhaps, one of the most squandered resources in conventional organizational environments, and you are never more aware of the monetary value of this time than when you are a freelancer. However, it is sometimes not easy to see where it all goes. How often do you comment at the end of the day that you wonder where the time went? In fact, this lack of awareness is exactly what needs to be addressed if you are to have the key to good time management. Here are some considerations that may help you manage your time as a freelancer.

Understand Your Working Patterns

You may be tempted to focus your energy on whatever is the most rewarding aspect of working for yourself. If it is the work itself, then you are likely to want to spend all your time doing this to the detriment of your administration. For a few days, or perhaps a week, note the rhythm of your day and record what you are doing and how much time you spend doing it. You may be surprised when you look at the amount of time you allocate to different aspects of your freelancing life and where you place the emphasis. Analyze the costs and benefits of spending your time in the way that you do.

Prioritize Your Activities

From your personal time and motion study, you will be able to identify those activities that give the greatest payback and those that are necessary in order to maintain the health of your business. Try creating a to-do list at the end of each day for you to pick up in the morning. It should contain a blend of professional, bureaucratic, and hygiene tasks.

Be Diligent and Disciplined

It takes a strong character to remain applied to an activity that is not intrinsically motivating, but as a freelancer, you will be required to do this over and over again—and it will bring its own rewards. If you forbid yourself to procrastinate or postpone activities that you do not relish, they will not build up and become insurmountable. You could perhaps find a way to reward yourself when you have completed your duties.

Do Not Work All Hours

When you are in a period of feast, you may be tempted to work all hours and forget you have a life—especially if your office is in your own home or contained by the technology of a laptop and cell phone. The last thing you will want to concern yourself with during this time is your boundaries, but if you have put these in place beforehand, the chances are you will be able to manage your project with a sense of proportion. These boundaries may be something such as agreeing with your spouse or partner where and when you will spend time together and what domestic and social activities you will participate in.

Create Boundaries

Make sure those in your professional and social circles know when you are “on duty” and when you are “off duty” so that they know the appropriate times to communicate with you. Often, if you work from home, people hold the mistaken belief that it means you are accessible for social or domestic duties at any time. Whereas you may have had an office in a building to which you commuted in the past, its geographical inaccessibility may now need to be replaced by virtual inaccessibility—emergencies excepted.

Having said this, if tasks are accumulating on your desk that you are dreading getting down to, do not use your home environment to find displacement activities. Pulling a weed or two out of the garden, dusting the dresser, or marinating that meat do not assist in putting the administrative burden behind you.

Plan Your Working, Thinking, Learning, and Recreational Time

If you think about the standard business model, you will notice that it caters to each of the four different activities mentioned above. A good organization will attend to its core purpose or mission while making sure all the supporting activities are done conscientiously. There will be thinking time allocated for strategizing and for coming up with ideas for product development and new innovations. There will be time to spend in professional and personal development in which new knowledge and competences will be built, as well as time spent celebrating and vacationing. If one of these activities is missing in the organizational culture, employees are often disgruntled, disillusioned, and demotivated. This is as true for you as it is for organizations. Make sure you feed your human needs, and plan the full range of activities for yourself as an organization.

Know and Manage Yourself

There is no one but you to manage yourself so be firm but fair. Be flexible with your time but try not to set standards that will be hard to live up to. If you send e-mails or make calls outside office hours or over the weekend, you may be training your clients inadvertently to think that you have no working boundaries. If they think you are prepared to have your personal time trespassed upon, you will raise their expectations about the level of your accessibility. Try putting e-mails in a draft folder ready to send during office hours and save all but your urgent calls. In this way, you can at least give the impression that you are not without boundaries.

Ask for Assistance When You Need It

It is tempting to think you can do it all by yourself and when your cash flow is sluggish, you will be even more determined to reign in your expenses. However, it is a false economy to do something that a professional could do faster and better than you can. Outsource your tax preparation and accounting obligations and seek assistance from a professional administrator to set up your office systems. You could use the time to build your business, which is a far better investment of your time than trying to work out how to add a column in a spreadsheet.

Balance Work and Play

Do not forget the law of diminishing returns. By overfocusing on your work, the level and quality of your productivity will diminish over time. Take a walk from time to time. Go to the gym. See a movie, play, or concert. These activities are important if you want to keep your energy levels up, and they will refresh your ability to do your job well.

What to Avoid

You Fail to See Your Business as a Business

The freelancing world is peppered with people who have a particular passion or specialty that they want to devote their time and energy to. This makes it easy for them to spend the majority of their time doing what they enjoy best rather than attending to the less inspiring things on the periphery of their working day. It is important to be disciplined about balancing all the activities contained within this business model and think about it as a whole rather than an indulgence of personal interest.

You Fail to Develop and Grow

Freelancers often forget their own professional development, thinking that they have no time to get away, pick up new knowledge, or learn new skills. If you find you cannot put yourself on a training program or attend a course, find a coach or mentor who can work with you to identify unique ways of keeping yourself professionally astute and up to date. You may also find that he or she can introduce you to a valuable new network of people.

You Fail to Take Care of Your Bookkeeping

Freelancers are often poor at keeping the books and invoicing their clients. It probably has something to do with all that data and all those pieces of paper. However, if you discipline yourself to update your books and to bill your clients immediately after you complete an assignment, it will not be so burdensome. Reserve a place in your wallet for all invoices related to what you do and make sure you record them and put them somewhere safe as you go along. You may find it helpful to put items on your invoice as the work proceeds and retrieve it for the final addition at the end of a piece of work.

You Fail to Look for New Opportunities

Most freelancers find it hard to take a risk and step outside their usual specialty. However, this means you can end up repeating the same kind of work in perpetual motion for the rest of your working life. Look out for opportunities that you can share with others. See if you can learn from them and leverage yourself into new communities with new opportunities. You need to find your own learning network as well as your own professional network so that you can keep on developing and growing.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Foster, Mark, *Do It Tomorrow and Other Secrets of Time Management*. Hodder & Stoughton Religious, 2006.

Tracy, Brian, *Eat That Frog!: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time*. Berret-Koehler, 2007.

Schlenger, Sunny, and Roberta Roesch, *How to Be Organized in Spite of Yourself: Time and Space Management That Works with Your Personal Style*. Signet Book, 1999.

Gleeson, Kerry, *The Personal Efficiency Program: How to Get Organized to Do More Work in Less Time*. John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2003.

Forster, Mark, *Get Everything Done and Still Have Time to Play. Help Yourself*, 2000.

Web Sites:

Right on the Money: www.rightonthemoney.org/shows/208_freelance/index.html

PowerHomeBiz: www.powerhomebiz.com/blog/2007/04/how-to-start-and-succeed-in-freelancing.html

AndyBudd:

www.andybudd.com/archives/2006/10/7_habits_of_a_highly_successful_freelance_web_designer

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